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BILL HAYES OFFERS GLIMPSE INTO CITY LIFE WITH NEW
PHOTOGRAPHY BOOK 'HOW NEW YORK BREAKS YOUR HEART'

By Lisa L. Colangelo, February 13, 2018



When Bill Hayes moved to New York City nine years ago, he eagerly explored his new surroundings with camera in hand.

Summoning the fearlessness needed to live in this city, Hayes approached total strangers and asked if he could photograph them.

The result of his exploits is a stunning portfolio of portraits that reflect the city's diversity and lively street life.

Hayes curated 150 of these photos for his new book "How New York Breaks Your Heart," which was released on Tuesday. The Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea will display 24 of those images in an exhibit that opens Feb. 15.

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His subjects range from young lovers curled up together on a park bench to restaurant cooks taking a cigarette break and elderly couples out for a stroll.

“I would take my camera and hop on the subway and go to a part of New York I had not been to before — whether it was Queens or Washington Heights or Brooklyn,” said Hayes, 56, who lives in the West Village.

“My working method from the very beginning is to approach people and ask them if I can take their picture,” Hayes said. “It is a challenge but it’s a kind of creative challenge I have given myself.”

While many well-known street photographers anonymously photograph scenes and subjects, Hayes said he isn’t comfortable with that method.

“I do get a lot of no’s,” he said with a laugh. “But if they say yes and the photo works, there’s a kind of magic created between two strangers.”

This is Hayes’ first collection of photographs after writing several books about medical history. He’s probably best known for his 2017 memoir “Insomniac City: New York, Oliver, and Me” which details his life with former partner Oliver Sacks, the world renowned neurologist. Sacks passed away in 2015.

“The reception to ‘Insomniac City’ was really positive,” Hayes said. “People responded as much to the photos as the memoir. My editor asked if I had more photographs.”

He did. About 20,000 of them.

Narrowing those down to 150 was no easy task. But the results are memorable.

Several were taken in front of an unmarked white wall on 22nd Street and 11th Avenue, which served as a natural backdrop. In one, a schoolboy gazes down at his beverage can. Another shot shows an older couple — the woman gripping her handbag with both hands, forcing a smile, while the man looks into the camera with ease.

One of Hayes’ favorite shots shows a pink prom dress hanging from a fire escape — a scene that is both forlorn yet hopeful.

And then there is Elona, a proud vision in turquoise and green, with bright orange hair and handmade false eyelashes.

“I hope people will see the connection that can happen between perfect strangers on the streets of New York, in the subways of New York in a way that I think doesn’t happen in many other places in the world,” Hayes said